



The Oldest Golf Course in America

By **Monroe S. Miller**, Golf Course Superintendent, Blackhawk Country Club

The first time I wondered about the location of the country's oldest golf course came with the publication of Gene Haas' book *Playing Through* last year. Thinking and reading about the history of the WSGA and golf in Wisconsin inspired the obvious curiosity and some research into just where our oldest existing golf course was.

The research was easy because it had been done and published by Dr. Geoffrey Cornish in his latest book, *Eighteen Stakes on a Sunday Afternoon*. I'm the proud owner of author's copy 22. Chapter

two has all the historical information on our earliest organized and existing courses in the U.S. and in North America.

The title "oldest existing golf course in North America" goes to Oakhurst Golf Links (1882 - 1884) in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. But it was abandoned for 80 years, until 1994, when it was restored. The first country club in North America was The Country Club in Brookline, Massachusetts. TCC, however, didn't have a golf course until 1893.

Competitors for the title "first organized golf clubs in the U.S."

are the Dorset Field Club in Dorset, Vermont (1886), Foxburg Country Club in Foxburg, Pennsylvania (1887), and the St. Andrews Golf Club in Yonkers, New York (1888). St. Andrews moved from the original course to a new 18-hole facility in Hastings-on-Hudson in the mid-1890s.

The Foxburg CC places its claim as the oldest golf course in the country on the fact that the golf course has been in continuous use in 1887.

Cheryl and I visited there this past fall, late on a gloomy and cloudy Saturday afternoon. The vil-



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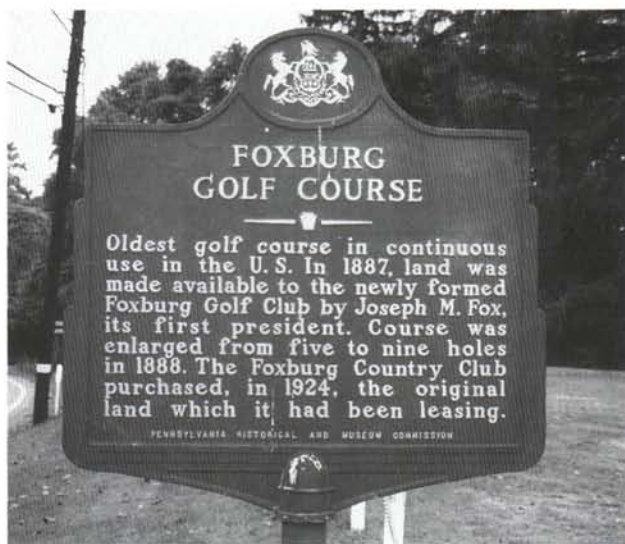
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This signage, located at the course's edge, tells of the club's history.

lage of Foxburg is within a few miles of I-80 in western Pennsylvania. Foxburg and surrounding communities were very prosperous at one time in the late 1800s - they are near the site of the first oil well in the world at Titusville, just north and west of Foxburg. That kind of prosperity is frequently associated with those who played golf during its early years in America.

Joseph Mickle Fox had a summer estate in Foxburg, and he was a member of the Merion Golf Club near Philadelphia (the Merion Cricket Club back then). In 1884 he traveled to England to play in some cricket matches, one of which was played in Edinburgh, Scotland. Since he was so close to St. Andrews, he went there to see golf being played at the St. Andrews Golf Club. He met a bearded old fellow there we are all familiar with - the golf professional, Tom Morris. Old Tom liked Fox, taught him the basics of golf and sold him some golf balls and clubs to take back to Pennsylvania.

Upon his return, Mr. Fox immediately started playing the game on his estate in Foxburg and built an 8-hole golf course. He invited friends in town to play, and so many were intrigued by the game and enjoyed playing it that a more spacious



FCC has one of the coziest clubhouses I've ever been in. The American Golf Hall of Fame and Museum is upstairs.



This photo, through the evergreens and across the course, give a hint of the area's beauty.



The club and the American Golf Hall of Fame buried a time capsule to be opened on the course's 200th anniversary.



The foreground bunker and the backside of the bunker in the background are clues of the course's age.

course had to be built. Fox provided the land to use for free and the Foxburg Country Club was born. These events all happened within three years of his trip to Scotland, and the course has been in continuous play since then - 1887.

The golf course today has the look of a course from years ago. The greens and tees are small. The surrounds are very steep on some features and non-existent on others. It was clear many features were built sparingly with minimum imported materials. Not a lot of soil was moved or used during construction and, fortunately, the club hasn't changed many of those features in more recent times.

The club property sits high above the Allegheny River - it looked to me like a good 300 feet. The golf pro said that years ago there was a practice tee located behind the clubhouse where golfers would hit balls, trying to reach the other side of the river. Complaints from fishermen put an end to the practice tee!

The golf course is charming, and so is the clubhouse. It is small compared to many of the houses seen on golf courses these days. It looks like a log cabin with a wrap around front porch. It has prominent stone chimneys on each end of the house and a brick red roof. The golf shop is attached at the right side of the house. A large

open room with a finished wood floor extends a warm welcome to you when you enter. I could see a small kitchen to the right rear of the living room.

I thought it was coincidental that at the exit from I-80 there was a state highway sign with directions to the American Golf Hall of Fame. It turns out that the AGHF is in the upstairs of the Foxburg Country Club clubhouse! Collected there are some excellent artifacts of golf - photos, old clubs, old golf balls and other such items. Of interest to me

were two clubs made by Old Tom Morris of St. Andrews and four clubs made for him. I wondered if they were originally Joe Fox's... Anyway, it was fun looking through the little museum at the Foxburg CC and talking with the fine staff in the clubhouse.

Foxburg is so atypical of America; usually a gem like this golf course is graded and changed beyond recognition. It was such a thrill to see people on that Saturday afternoon playing golf on a course in use for 115 years. ♣



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